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SUBJECT: KAZAKHSTAN'S SENATE ELECTIONS NOT REALLY A TEST
CASE FOR DEMOCRACY

SUMMARY

1. (SBU) Kazakhstan's Senate elections will take place on October 4, when local and regional maslikhats (legislatures) will vote to fill 16 Senate seats. The government has launched a wide media campaign to raise the profile of these usually low-key elections and has invited international organizations and foreign missions to "observe" them. The maslikhats are dominated by the ruling Nur Otan party, so there is little doubt that it will emerge as a landslide winner. The opposition refuses to participate in an election in which it maintains the results are "predetermined." Only one opposition party, Ak Zhol -- a party shunned by the other opposition parties -- has a candidate in the running. Election monitoring NGOs are also skeptical that the elections will bring any surprise results. End Summary.

SENATE ELECTION CAMPAIGN LAUNCHED

2. (U) September 14 marked the beginning of the campaign season for elections to Kazakhstan's Senate, the upper house of parliament. The elections are scheduled for October 4, when regional and local maslikhats (legislatures) will gather in separate regional conferences to vote on filling 16 Senate seats. The Senate consists of 47 Senators: 15 are directly appointed by the President and 32 are elected by the maslikhats, with two of these 32 Senate seats reserved for each of country's fourteen oblasts and two for each of its two largest cities, Astana and Almaty (which are administered separately from the oblasts).

3. (U) Candidates for Senate seats are either nominated by the maslikhats, or put their candidacies forward independently. Those who clear the registration process receive public financing (approximately \$2,000 per candidate) and are guaranteed access to the media. The system does not make it easy for individuals with declared opposition-party affiliation to complete, as party-affiliated contenders can only get on the ballot through nomination by a maslikhat, all of which are dominated by the ruling Nur Otan party. Of 88 candidates who initially declared their candidacies, 50 managed to get registered. Of these 50, 21 are members of Nur Otan, 16 claim to be independents, and 12 opted not to declare a party affiliation. One candidate is from Alikhan Baimenov's Ak Zhol party -- a party which claims to be in the opposition but which other opposition parties consider to be part of the government's "pocket opposition." Ak Zhol's candidate was apparently nominated by an maslikhat in Kostanai oblast.

DEMOCRATIC TEST CASE ...

4. (U) While the Senate elections usually garner little notice, this time the government is keen to raise their profile. In an extensive interview with the newspaper Litra on September 13 under the headline "Test Case Elections," the

Central Election Commission (CEC) chairman Kuandyk Turgankulov stressed that these are the last elections before Kazakhstan's 2010 OSCE chairmanship and that they must take place "in strict accordance with national legislation." The CEC organized several training sessions for prospective candidates, and television and print media have been filled with extensive stories on the electoral process and interviews with sitting Senators. The ruling Nur Otan party went so far as to hold primaries to pick its candidates, although critics pointed out that the primary process is much better suited for direct elections, like those for the Majilis, parliament's lower house. To underline the openness and fairness of the upcoming contest, the government invited international organizations, NGOs, and foreign governments (including the U.S.) to send election "observers" on October 14.

... OR POLITICAL THEATER?

15. (U) The opposition parties, predictably, are quite cynical about the fairness and transparency of the upcoming elections. The major opposition parties have declared that they will not participate in what OSDP leader Zharmakhan Tuyakbay called "the forthcoming farce." Tuyakbay told the press that the results of the election are "predetermined" by the fact that 85 percent of regional and local maslikhat members are from "the one and only Nur Otan party." "The system does not allow for any result other than a 100 percent victory for the ruling party," he contended, "and OSDP does not intend to give a veneer of competition" to the elections. Communist Party leader Serikbolsyn Abdildin and Azat party

ASTANA 00001819 002 OF 002

head Bulat Abilov declared that they have no intention to spend time and money on elections they are certain to lose. Their decision was criticized by some political observers as a lost opportunity to at least publicize their ideas and party platforms.

16. (SBU) Civil society leaders are also pessimistic that the upcoming contest will, as the government hopes, showcase Kazakhstan's democratic development. Taskyn Rahimbekova, head of the Republican Network of Independent Monitors, told us that while her organization plans to monitor the elections, she has "little doubt" of the results. She believes it unlikely that Nur Otan maslikhat members will buck the party and vote for candidates not pre-approved by the party leadership. The sudden fury of activity around the elections is "nothing more than a show, staged to enhance Nur Otan's positive image," she said.

COMMENT

17. (C) There seems to be little justification for the "election fever" the government is trying to stoke. Since the Senators will be selected by an "electorate" dominated by Nur Otan legislators, there is no uncertainty as to who will emerge the winner. In this context, public election campaigns and blitz educational outreach make little sense. These are the last scheduled elections before 2010, however, and it appears that some in the government have decided that this is nevertheless a chance to showcase the electoral process in Kazakhstan. End Comment.
MILAS